



# Sierra Club Hawai'i Chapter

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## CITY COUNCIL, CITY AND COUNTY OF HONOLULU

April 25, 2012, 10:00 A.M.  
(Testimony is 3 pages long)

### TESTIMONY STRONGLY SUPPORTING BILL 10 (2012), CD1

Aloha Chair Martin and Committee Members -

The Sierra Club, Hawai'i Chapter, with 10,000 dues-paying members and supporters, **strongly supports** Bill 10 (2012) CD1. We support all three proposed versions of the measure, but believe the County's authority to enact a fee in this instance is subject to challenge.

Passage of Bill 10 would reduce Oahu's growing opala crisis. Throwaway bags simply are not a part of Hawaii's sustainable future.

#### I. Background:

##### A. *Disproportionate Impact on the Environment.*

Throwaway bags have a disproportionate impact upon the environment. As they are loosed into the wild -- the modern-day tumbleweed -- they contribute to litter and pose a threat to avian and marine life in Hawai'i. As noted by NOAA,<sup>1</sup> plastic photo-degrades -- breaking down into smaller and smaller pieces due to exposure to solar UV radiation. However, when in water plastic does not get direct sunlight exposure, therefore breakdown happens much more slowly in the aquatic environment. So far as we know, plastics do not ever fully "go away," but rather break down into smaller and smaller pieces, sometimes referred to as microplastics.

Plastics also have the potential to adsorb contaminants from the marine environment and carry these contaminants through the food chain. Plastic debris attracts and accumulates hydrophobic organic toxins such as PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) up to 100,000-1,000,000 times ambient seawater concentrations. These toxins can then bioaccumulate up the food chain, where they directly impact human health.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://marinedebris.noaa.gov/info/plastic.html>

**B. Solid Waste Crisis.**

Honolulu is faced with a solid waste crisis. The proliferation of throwaway bags contributes to this problem. They tax our economy and environment when they are littered or placed in our overflowing landfills. For example, a recent study conducted in Seattle concluded -- even with a high 13% recycling rate (greater than the national average of 3-5%) -- approximately 1,650 tons of plastic bags were put into the landfill annually.<sup>2</sup> The net cost to Seattle and ratepayers of collecting, transferring and disposing of waste was calculated to be approximately \$121 per ton or approximately \$200,000 annually for plastic grocery bags.

Even if these bags are burned at H-POWER, they are essentially converted to greenhouse gasses, further hastening global climate change, and ultimately not addressing the root of our unsustainable problem.

**C. Cost to Our Economy.**

"Free" single use bags are an expense that is typically not directly visible by customers. Retailers spend hundreds of millions of dollars annually to provide single-use bags to customers. For example, individual supermarkets can spend up to \$1,500 to \$6,000 a month just to provide single-use bags to their customers at the check-out.<sup>3</sup> Even major retailers such as Target and CVS are realizing this significant cost burden and are offering discount incentives to customers who bring their own bags.<sup>4</sup>

The cost of purchasing hundreds of millions of bags in Hawai'i annually is most certainly passed on to local consumers, but it is not a visible cost and, thus, normal market controls do not take place. As with anything "free," we tend to take advantage of the ready supply of throwaway bags without considering the indirect costs.

It should be noted that two highly successful business in Hawai'i -- Costco and Wholefoods -- do not offer its customers plastic bags. These businesses are flourishing. The switch by

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<sup>2</sup> See Alternatives to Disposable Shopping Bags and Food Service Items, available at [http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/util/Services/Recycling/Reduce\\_Reuse\\_Exchange/ProposedGreenFee/index.htm](http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/util/Services/Recycling/Reduce_Reuse_Exchange/ProposedGreenFee/index.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Downing, J. "Free Grocery Bags Targeted for Extinction in California," *Sacramento Bee*, Aug. 25, 2008. Estimates from bag manufacturers and the Food Marketing Institute. Available at [http://www.roplast.com/documents/Free\\_grocery\\_bags\\_targeted\\_for\\_extinction\\_in\\_California\\_-\\_Sacramento\\_Politics\\_-\\_California\\_Politics\\_Sacramento\\_Bee.pdf](http://www.roplast.com/documents/Free_grocery_bags_targeted_for_extinction_in_California_-_Sacramento_Politics_-_California_Politics_Sacramento_Bee.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Horovitz, B. "Target, CVS Put Plastic Bags in the Bull's-Eye, Pay for Reusables," *USA Today*, Oct. 19, 2009.

Wholefoods alone kept 100 million plastic bags out of the environment between April 22, 2008 and the end of 2008.

The Sierra Club supports a ban on most throwaway bags but would encourage the consideration of other measures -- like the bills currently being considered by the Hawai'i State Legislature -- that would impose a fee on paper and plastic bags -- to truly advance the use of reusable bags.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.